Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

EBL 101

A New Path: Research Methods

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Originally published in:
Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, *6*(2), 85–87.
https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/10233/8146

Received: 26 Apr. 2011 **Accepted:** 28 Apr. 2011

For more than two years, this column has taken you through the steps of evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP). With the final step taken in the last issue (keeping in mind that EBLIP is an iterative process and that the notion of the final step is sometimes interpretive), it is time to choose a new path and take the first step on an exciting new journey. For the next while, I will explore the exhilarating world of research methods!

Do I sound invigorated? I am! I'm no expert, by any means. But, I am a lifelong learner; a practitioner-researcher with a strong interest in research methods, so we are going to learn together. And of course this column is EBL 101, so the information will be introductory and by no means exhaustive. As of right now, I have no set plan on the exact methods I will tackle, nor the order in which I will wrestle them to the ground. So if you have any needs or suggestions, please let me know. For this first column on our new path, I'm going to talk about qualitative and quantitative research in general. Yes, that is a big topic for a small column, so let's see how it goes.

The rivalry between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montreal Canadians (hockey for the non-Canadians on board) has nothing on the

rivalry between quantitative and qualitative research methods, or at least between the researchers devoted to them. Qualitative scholars consigned quantitative research to the lower echelons of the scientific field because of its "subjective, interpretive approach" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). Qualitative researchers have defended the subjective, interpretive approach, stating that it does not reduce the subject to numbers, but rather uses a holistic approach to preserve the complexities of the subject (Black, 1994, p. 425). Granted, we are moving in the direction of being able to see the value in both types of methodology, and the rivalry is becoming a comfortable living arrangement (at least I think it is!). However, that was not always the case, and for a long time, only the seemingly solid numbers of quantitative data were seen to have value.

In the early days of EBLIP, a hierarchy of evidence was put forward which borrowed heavily from evidence-based medicine, placing randomized controlled trials near the top and case studies down at the bottom. Research methods were given a place in the hierarchy based on their perceived robustness as methods, not taking into account the quality of the research that comes out of that methodology, which is highly subjective depending on the individual study (Booth, 2010, p. 84). Qualitative methods were given a nod, but the impression was one of the privileging of quantitative methods. Given writes that "qualitative researchers and the results of their work remain marginalized in EBLIP" (2007, p. 16). She explains this marginalization by looking at the history of EBLIP: "in understanding the historical path that this movement has taken in our field (i.e. moving through the ranks of health librarianship to try to find a stronger voice across library contexts), it is little wonder that the controversial baggage about the quality of qualitative evidence has been transported along the way" (Given, 2006, p. 382). Every movement has growing pains and I believe it is safe to say that qualitative methods are coming into their own in EBLIP. LIS as a social science is well-suited to both realms of methodology. I refer you to an editorial written by Denise Koufogiannakis in *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* (2010, 5.3). In it, she addresses the evidence hierarchy and points out that the choice of research methods should be driven by the type of research question asked. This viewpoint about choice emerges elsewhere (Newman & Benz, 1998, p. 14; Bell, 2010, p. 6; Silverman, 2010, p. 9).

The notion of research is often fraught, no matter from which discipline you look at it. And while I am going to focus the rest of the column on outlining some of the differences between quantitative and qualitative methodology, I urge you to explore the debate between the two. There seems to be as many opinions as there are researchers. As well, I should note that pitting one against the other via a laundry list of differences sets these two paradigms up as a dichotomy. Many involved in the debate feel that a dichotomous relationship limits both methodologies (Morgan & Smircich, 1080, p. 491). We would be better served to realize that there are times when both types of methods can be used in the same research study (also known as mixed-methods research) for a depth and richness of perspectives and in order to triangulate findings. This is based on the premise that "multiple viewpoints allow for greater accuracy" (Jick, 1979, p.602).

In its simplest definition, quantitative research works with numbers and qualitative research works with people or text. Quantitative methods attempt to answer "how many?" and qualitative methods attempt to answer "why is this happening?" Quantitative research emerged from a positivistic paradigm, and the belief that there is one objective reality and it is our job to apprehend it. Qualitative research follows the naturalistic paradigm, which posits that there are many realities, that the subject is involved in creating his/her own reality, and that it is our job to discover and explore those subjective realities. Quantitative methods, using deductive processes and statistical analyses, attempt to

confirm a hypothesis and test a theory, while qualitative methods, using inductive processes, explore a phenomenon and attempt to generate a theory. Methods common to quantitative research include surveys, randomized controlled trials, and highly structured observation. Methods common to qualitative research include in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

Of course this only scratches the surface. The number of books and articles on the subject of research methodology is astounding. Just three examples include *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* by John W. Creswell, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, and *Introduction to Quantitative Research Methods: An Investigative Approach by Mark Balnaves and Peter Caputi.* The ways in which researchers utilize research methods are varied. In upcoming columns, I will make my way from one method to another and I hope you will join me along the way. It strikes me that the features found in the Open Journal System used by *EBLIP* would be very handy for having an ongoing discussion on research methods. Look for the Article Tools on the right side of the page when you have opened up an article in the journal. You will have the options, among others, to email the author or post a comment. You can also use the "add a comment" feature found underneath the pdf version of the article. I welcome such interaction, as I believe that a community of like-minded individuals could generate conversations that would enrich us all.

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